DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 345 CG 017 587

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TITLE Physical Attractiveness: Its Influence on the Perceptions of Counselors.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Counseling Effectiveness; *Counselor Characteristics; Counselor Client Relationship; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Attraction; Perception; Personality Traits; *Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Physical Attractiveness

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that a client's positive views of a counselor enhance commitment to treatment, positive outcome expectancies, and receptivity to counselor influence. To examine the impact of counselor gender and physical attractiveness on perceived counselor effectiveness, 60 college students evaluated male and female counselors on 15 variables after hearing a tape recording of a counselor self-introduction paired with an attractive or unattractive photograph. Two control groups heard the tape but were not shown the photographs. An analysis of the results showed that attractive counselors were perceived as significantly more decisive, interesting, caring, open-minded, likeable, and better adjusted than the unattractive counselors. Female counselors were seen as more competent, interesting, likeable, well-adjusted, understanding, considerate, and easier to confide in than male counselors across levels of attractiveness. The findings suggest that physical attractiveness mediates initial impressions in an introductory counseling analogue situation. (Author/BL)

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Physical Attractiveness: Its' Influence on the Perceptions of Counselors

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of physical attractiveness on perceived counselor effectiveness. Sixty undergraduate students evaluated male and female counselors on fifteen variables after hearing a tape recording of a counselor self-introduction paired with an attractive or unattractive photograph. Two control groups heard the tape but were shown no photograph. Attractive counselors were perceived as significantly more decisive, interesting, caring, open-minded, likeable and better adjusted than the unattractive counselors. Female counselors were seen as more competent, interesting, likeable, well-adjusted, understanding, considerate, and easier to confide in than male counselors across levels of attractiveness.

Physical Attractiveness: Its' Influence on the Perceptions of Counselors

Identification of counselor characteristics associated with favorable therapeutic outcome has been the focus of intense investigation. Goldstein and Shipman (1961) attest that a positive view of a counselor enhances the client's commitment to treatment, expectancies of positive outcome, and the client's receptivity to counselor influence. Research in this area shows that a client's expectancy regarding the therapeutic relationship is directly related to the outcome of the counseling process (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967; Shapiro, Struening, Barten, & Shapiro, 1973). Many studies have emphasized the role that personality and physical characteristics of both clients and counselors play in therapeutic outcome (Goldstein & Shipman, 1961, Martin, Friedmeyer & Moore, 1977; Shapiro, Struening, Barten & Shapiro, 1973).

Research has shown that physical attractiveness is one variable that exerts influence on interpersonal interactions. Physical attractiveness has been shown to operate as a source of social influence on actual behavioral responsiveness and interpersonal judgements (Hobfall & Penner, 1978; Corrigan, Dell, Lewis, & Schmidt; 1980, Jarett & Everhart, 1983). Therapist physical attractiveness enhances the degree of client self-disclosure in initial encounters (Brundage, Derlega, & Cash, 1977; Cash, 1978). Sigall and Aronson (1969) found that subjects were willing to return for more sessions with an attractive counselor. Shapiro, Struening, Shapiro, and Barten (1976) found that there was a strong positive relationship between therapist and client

ratings of improvement and their evaluations of each other as physically attractive, likeable, and either a good therapist or a good client.

Attractive male counselors were perceived as more competent, trustworthy, intelligent, and friendly when subjects viewed videotapes of attractive and unattractive counselors using the same script (Cash, Begley, McCown, & Weise, 1975). Subjects also expressed greater confidence in the attractive counselor for help with personal problems. Attractive female counselors were perceived to be more competent, attentive and professional in a study by Lewis and Walsh (1978).

Carter (1978) attempted a replication and extension of the Cash et al. (1975) study. She modified the presentation of the stimuli which determined the attractive/unattractive dimension; included female as well as male counselors; and examined possible sex of counselor X sex of client interactions. Surprisingly, she found no main effects on the attractiveness dimension. (This appeared to be the result of a very narrow difference between the ratings of the attractive and unattractive stimulus photographs). She found that there was a significant Sex of Counselor effect, favoring female counselors, on four of twelve scales.

In determining their stimulus photographs, Cash et al. (1975) used only one stimulus person (male) who was cosmetically altered for each condition. Carter (1978) utilized photographs of different individuals (male and female) but her range of the ratings between attractive and unattractive was very narrow.

Vargas and Borkowski (1982) attempted to rectify several of the deficits of the Cash et al. (1975), and Carter (1978) studies by widening the range

between attractive and unattractive photographs and extending the subjects' exposure to the counselor for three sessions. They used a video tape for the first session and a picture accompanied by an audiotape for the last two sessions. This study employed all male subjects who judged two female counselors. Each counselor was cosmetically altered for the unattractive condition. However, one of the counselors showed a great difference in ratings of attractiveness and unattractiveness; the second did not, which may be the result of employing the method of cosmetic alteration in this type of study.

The present study utilized both male and female audiotapes and photographs of four different individuals (two male and two female). In an attempt to overcome some of the shortcomings of previous research, male and female photographs were used with a significant difference in ratings of their level of attractiveness. Also both male and female subjects were included in the study.

The present research examines the influence of counselor gender and physical attractiveness on fifteen counseling related characteristics. This study adds dimensions related to empathy and congruence to the work previously done by Cash et al., (1975) and Carter (1978). These dimensions strategically relate to the therapeutic process (Carkhuff, 1969) and thereby help to assess the influence of physical attractiveness on perceived therapeutic qualities of counselors.

It was hypothesized that physically attractive counselors would receive higher ratings on counselor variables than would unattractive or control counselors. Previous research suggests that the effect may be that the

unattractive counselors would be rated lower than either attractive or control counselors (Cash & Kehr, 1978). It was also predicted that physical attractiveness would effect the perception of male and female counselors in the same manner.

Method

Subjects Sixty caucasian undergraduate students at the University of North Florida voluntarily participated in the study. The subjects' ages ranged from 20-55 (M=31).

Procedure Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six groups composed of five males and five females. They were asked to respond to the dependent measures on the basis of listening to a tape recording. Three groups heard a tape recording of a male counselor; three groups heard a tape recording of a female counselor. Group One was simultaneously shown a picture of an attractive male and asked to rate this counselor on fifteen personality variables. Group Two received a picture of an unattractive male and subjects were asked to rate him on the same characteristics. Group Three received no picture and rated the counselor on the basis of the tape recording alone. This procedure was repeated for the last three groups, who heard a tape of a female counselor. Group Four saw a picture of an attractive female; group Five received a picture of an unattractive female and group Six received no picture.

Subjects were asked to complete evaluation forms regarding their initial impressions of the counselor they had just heard. They rated the counselor on a list of 15-7 step rating scales (similar to those used by Cash et al. 1975) each composed of bipolar anchoring adjectives.

Two 2-minute audio recordings, one by a male and one by a female were employed. The script of the tapes included statements regarding the counselor's training and background, experience, interests and activities. This self-description is viewed as a typical introductory statement made by a counselor in an initial therapy session (Cash et al. 1975). The male and female tapes consisted of the same script and were spoken in a warm, friendly, yet matter-of-fact manner.

Two photographs of Caucasian males and females were used. They were standardized by 50 students asked to rank order the photographs of thirty people within sex, according to their physical attractiveness. Pictures were chosen at random from a college yearbook. This standardization procedure has been employed in numerous studies in this area of inquiry (Jacobson, 1981; Cash et al. 1975; Janda, O'Grady & Barnhart, 1981; Carter, 1978). The male and female photographs receiving the highest and lowest mean ratings for physical attractiveness were chosen for the study. There was a significant difference between means of attractive and unattractive photographs for both males and females. The ranking score for attractiveness had a range from 1 to 15, with 1 the minimum ranking and 15 the maximum or most attractive. The male photographs had mean ratings of 12.1 and 3.5. The female photographs had mean ratings of 13.2 and 2.4. Sex and order of presentation of photographs were randomly assigned.

Results

Based on a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA), Wilke's lambda criterion yielded a significant main effect for the attractiveness condition ($F(30,80) = 4.04$; $p<.0001$). Attractive counselors received higher ratings

than unattractive counselors or the control groups. There was also a significant main effect due to sex of counselor ($F(15,40) = 2.29$; $p.<.01$). Female counselors generally received higher ratings on counselor variables than did males. There were no significant effects for sex of subject. There were no interaction effects. Tables 1 and 2 show the means and standard deviations for each counselor variable.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

After the MANOVA, univariate analysis of variance procedures were computed for each counselor variable. Table 3 shows the F-value obtained for each variable comparing overall ratings of attractive vs. unattractive counselors. Attractive counselors were rated as being more decisive, interesting, caring, open-minded, likeable, well- adjusted and understanding than unattractive counselors. The physical attractiveness variable was also significant ($p<.0001$), which indicates that the pictures were viewed similarly by subjects in the standardization procedure and in the study itself.

Insert Table 3 about here

Additionally, Duncan's multiple range tests were computed for each counselor variable. This analysis compared individual means with one another, in an effort to sort out which groups caused the actual differences in the

MANOVA.

Attractive counselors rated significantly ($p<.05$) higher than both unattractive and control counselors on the following variables: decisive, open-minded, likeable, well-adjusted and understanding. Attractive counselors were also perceived as being significantly ($p<.05$) more caring, trustworthy and considerate than control counselors, but did not differ significantly from the unattractive counselors on these variables. Also, attractive counselors were rated higher ($p<.05$) than unattractive counselors on ratings of sincerity. There was no difference between attractive counselors and control counselors on this variable. Unattractive counselors were rated ($p<.05$) as less interesting than attractive or control counselors. In addition, the attractiveness variable yielded significant ($p<.05$) differences between attractive counselors, unattractive counselors and control counselors.

Female counselors rated significantly ($p<.05$) higher than male counselors on 7 of the 15 variables. They were perceived as more competent, interesting, likeable, well-adjusted, understanding, and considerate, regardless of their level of attractiveness. Subjects also felt significantly ($p<.05$) more comfortable disclosing personal information to female counselors than male counselors.

Discussion

The results support the hypothesis of a clear, positive effect for physically attractive counselors. It appears that the stereotype "what is beautiful is good" carries over into counseling. A general positive effect for physical attractiveness is suggested, as opposed to the results found by Cash and Kehr (1978) and Carter (1978), where a debilitative effect for

unattractiveness occurred. Attractive counselors were rated significantly higher than unattractive or control counselors on several variables that are seen as facilitative to client self-exploration (Truax, 1975; Carkhuff, 1969), counseling outcome (Goldstein & Shipman, 1971), and the therapeutic process (Truax, 1975). Shapiro et al. (1973) found that the most important items that correlated with prognosis were client and therapist perceptions of each other as likeable, competent and physically attractive individuals. The present findings indicate that physical attractiveness alone exerts an interpersonal influence. Attractive counselors are perceived as more competent and likeable. If this is coupled with the assertion that physical attractiveness facilitates self-disclosure in initial encounters (Brundage, Derlega & Cash, 1977), it appears that attractive counselors may have a therapeutic advantage, at least in initial sessions. Since attractive counselors were also perceived as more likeable, the therapeutic process itself could be facilitated (Schofield, 1964; Goldstein, 1971).

Obviously, there are limits to the impact of physical attractiveness in counselors. The subjects in this study were limited to initial impressions based solely on a photograph accompanying a tape recording. Personality variables are multi-faceted and are difficult to judge by photographs. Counselor attractiveness will interact with other variables in the counseling process; yet it merits consideration of the influence it exerts.

There was a main effect for counselor gender. This is due to the fact that females consistently rated higher in all three groups than did their male counterparts across counselor variables. This could indicate a sexual

stereotype that females are seen as more therapeutic regardless of their physical attractiveness. These results concur with those found by Boulware and Holmes (1970) and Fuller (1964), where subjects preferred female therapists when dealing with personal and social concerns. Further examination of this finding is necessary, expecially considering Carter's (1978) findings that female subjects had more positive views and expectations of female counselors. The absence of interaction effects for physical attractiveness X counselor gender is unique in this field of research.

The variables of understanding, likeability, open-mindedness and caring were significantly intercorrelated and would seem to encapsulate Carkhuff's definition of the empathic counselor. The variables termed decisive and well-adjusted were also significantly intercorrelated and can be indicative of Carkhuff's term of congruence. All six of these variables were statistically significant in this study. These inferences warrant further consideration due to their tenative nature and influence on the counseling process.

The present study indicates that physical attractiveness mediates initial impressions in an introductory counseling analogue situation. It is important to be aware of this sterotype and the effects it can have on potential issues in the counseling process.

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TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Counselor Variables for Attractive, Unattractive and Anonymous Female Counselors

Variable	Attractive		Unattractive		Control	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competent	6.70	.483	5.90	1.66	6.40	.843
Decisive	6.60	.516	5.20	1.61	5.20	1.47
Professional	6.80	.421	5.90	1.37	6.00	1.24
Interesting	6.10	.875	4.70	1.25	5.20	1.54
Trustworthy	6.40	1.26	6.00	.942	5.60	1.42
Sincere	6.80	.421	5.70	1.33	6.20	1.22
Intelligent	6.40	1.89	6.50	.527	6.30	.674
Caring	6.30	1.33	6.10	1.44	5.50	1.43
Open-minded	6.50	.527	5.70	.948	5.50	1.26
Likeable	6.80	.421	5.70	1.05	6.10	.994
Well-adjusted	7.00	.000	5.60	1.07	6.20	.918
Understanding	6.80	.421	6.10	.875	6.00	.942
Considerate	6.70	.483	6.10	.875	6.10	.875
Attractive	6.50	.527	3.50	1.08	5.20	1.13
Comfortable to talk to	6.10	1.10	4.60	1.50	4.90	1.85

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Counselor Variables for Attractive, Unattractive and Anonymous Male Counselors

Variable	Attractive		Unattractive		Control	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competent	5.90	.875	5.40	.966	5.40	1.42
Decisive	5.90	.567	5.20	1.13	5.70	1.05
Professional	6.10	.994	5.40	1.50	5.80	1.39
Interesting	5.40	1.26	3.20	1.47	5.10	1.10
Trustworthy	6.00	.816	5.20	1.22	5.10	1.10
Sincere	6.20	.788	5.60	1.50	5.80	1.39
Intelligent	6.10	.567	5.70	.948	5.90	.875
Caring	6.10	.875	5.60	1.26	4.70	1.63
Open-minded	6.00	1.15	5.10	1.44	5.00	1.41
Likeable	6.20	.421	4.70	1.41	5.50	1.50
Well-adjusted	6.10	.316	5.10	1.44	5.50	1.26
Understanding	6.20	.421	5.30	1.41	5.20	1.39
Considerate	6.20	.421	5.70	1.25	5.60	1.07
Attractive	5.90	.316	1.80	1.13	4.60	.966
Comfortable to talk to	4.50	1.35	4.10	1.96	4.20	1.75

TABLE 3

Univariate Tests of Significance

for

Attractive and Unattractive Counselors

Counselor Variable	F	p
Competent	1.73	.18
Decisive	4.63	.01**
Professional	2.28	.11
Interesting	10.37	.0002****
Trustworthy	2.89	.06
Sincere	2.63	.08
Intelligent	.14	.86
Caring	3.45	.03*
Open-minded	4.24	.01**
Likeable	7.52	.001***
Well-adjusted	7.50	.001***
Understanding	4.88	.01**
Considerate	2.85	.06
Attractive	76.57	.0001****
I'd feel comfortable disclosing personal information	1.92	.15